



## THE USE OF NON-CONVENTIONAL CANCER THERAPIES

This Guide had been provided by the Anticancer Fund as a service to patients, to help patients and their relatives better understand the notion of non-conventional cancer therapies. We recommend patients to ask their doctors which treatments could be useful for their situation. The information described in this document is based on scientific research and has informative purposes only.

More information about the Anticancer Fund: [www.anticancerfund.org](http://www.anticancerfund.org)

*For words marked with an asterisk\*, a definition is provided at the end of the document.*



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## 1. THE USE OF NON-CONVENTIONAL THERAPIES AND CANCER

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Choosing whether or not to use a complementary therapy\* is a personal matter. The answer is not the same for everyone. If you are thinking about trying a complementary therapy during or after your conventional cancer care, be sure to make a safe and informed decision.

It is important to discuss any use of non-conventional therapies\* with your health care professionals, and review the available research-based evidence.

- There is a risk that non-conventional therapies can affect your conventional cancer treatments\*, producing unwanted results, e.g. natural health products (NHPs) may also interact with other medications you are taking for other medical conditions.
- Many non-conventional treatments have not yet been tested properly. Thus non-conventional treatment effects are not known, particularly for specific groups like cancer patients.
- There are currently *no* non-conventional therapies that have provided scientific evidence of curing cancer, but several have been proven to help manage symptoms and improve overall quality of life.
- Lifestyle choices like good diet, exercise and quitting smoking are still the most important lifestyle changes you can make. They will improve your cancer treatment outcomes and quality of life and help prevent recurrence.

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### *Talk to your (conventional) doctor before you use non-conventional therapies*

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Some people diagnosed with cancer are afraid that their doctor won't understand or approve of the use of non-conventional therapies. But doctors know that people with cancer want to take an active part in their care. They want the best for their patients and are often willing to work with them.

What questions should I ask my doctor about non-conventional therapies?

- What types of non-conventional therapies might
  - help me to cope, reduce my stress and feel better?
  - help me feel less tired?
  - help to deal with cancer symptoms, such as pain or side effects of treatment, such as nausea?
- If you decide to try a non-conventional therapy:
  - will it interfere with my treatment with conventional medical products?
  - can your doctor help you to understand the information you found about non-conventional therapies?
  - can your doctor suggest a non-conventional practitioner for you to talk to?
  - will your doctor cooperate with non-conventional practitioners?



## 2. TYPES OF NON-CONVENTIONAL THERAPIES

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- **Natural products** or natural health products (NHPs) are substances found in nature that usually have a pharmacological or biological activity. Natural products originate from sources like plants, animals, bacteria and fungi. Supplements are also included in the group of natural products.  
A major part of current conventional chemotherapy drugs are natural products that are slightly modified.
- **Synthetic products** (excluding registered drugs) are substances produced synthetically or modified natural products that are not registered as anti-cancer drugs.
- **Diet and Nutrition:** The controlled consumption of specific foods and beverages with the intention of influencing disease outcome.
- **Cell-based therapies** involve the administration of manipulated self or non-self human cells to patients. They are divided into two sub-categories:
  - Autologous cell therapies cover treatments in which white blood cells are isolated from a patient, manipulated in the laboratory and subsequently administered to the patient.
  - Heterologous cell therapies cover treatments in which non-self human cells are manipulated in the laboratory and subsequently administered to the patient.
- **Energy-based therapies** use electromagnetic energy including electricity, magnetic fields, radio waves, microwaves, infra-red rays, as well as light to diagnose or treat disease.
- **Mind-body interventions** are modalities that enhance the mind's capacity to affect the biological functioning of the body. Mind-body therapies include psychological, emotional, social, expressive and spiritual approaches. Energy treatments based on putative human energy fields (i.e. fields which have yet to be measured) are listed as mind-body interventions.
- **Body-based and Manipulative therapies** are physical manipulation of the body, e.g. using the hands, feet or various types of devices. Examples are reflexology and progressive muscle relaxation.
- **Whole Medical Systems** are based on distinct theories about treatment and practice and include multiple products and/or practices. Examples are traditional Chinese medicine (TCM) and naturopathy.



## 3. WHY PEOPLE USE NON-CONVENTIONAL THERAPIES

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There are many reasons for using non-conventional therapies\*.

Some of these reasons include:

- Easing cancer symptoms or the side effects of conventional treatments\*
- Dealing with the stress of cancer and its treatment
- Restoring a sense of hope
- Strengthening the body's ability to heal
- Strengthening the immune-system
- Offering a sense of control over their cancer experience
- Seeing the treatments as natural and less toxic than medical treatments

There is growing proof that positive lifestyle choices (e.g. eating well, being active, and having a positive mental attitude) are things you can do yourself to advance your own healing and improve your quality of life.



#### 4. KEY ISSUES TO CONSIDER BEFORE MAKING A DECISION ABOUT NON-CONVENTIONAL THERAPIES

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In order to make a safe and informed decision, you need to consider the points below before deciding whether or not to use non-conventional therapies\* or practitioners thereof.

##### 4.1 Achieving your goals

When beginning a non-conventional therapy, you should consider your goal(s) in using the therapy and when you expect to see results. Some common goals are:

- Survivorship / prevention of recurrence
- Stress management
- Side effects management (e.g. fatigue)
- Taking action / maintaining hope

Take the time to carefully consider what you hope to achieve, then match those goals to appropriate non-conventional therapies. Be specific.

##### 4.2 Finding and evaluating evidence

When reading information about non-conventional therapies, it is important to examine how credible it is before using it to make decisions. If you answer “no” to any of the following questions, check with other sources of information and a health professional and use some caution.

For each resource type, here are some questions to consider:

###### 4.2.1 Research articles

- Was the study published in an academic scientific journal?
- Was it reviewed by other researchers? (i.e. peer-reviewed)
- Consider the evidence pyramid on page 10.
- If a product is tested on humans, is it a randomized clinical trial\* (people randomly assigned to different treatment groups) or based on a large sample of patients (30 is tiny, 300 is better)? On the Anticancer Fund website, you can find a list of all open Phase III trials concerning cancer retrieved at [www.clinicaltrials.gov](http://www.clinicaltrials.gov), which is a register of federally and privately supported clinical trials conducted worldwide. You can search this list <http://www.anticancerfund.org/trials> by entering a type of cancer, selecting a specific country and then entering a keyword or the NCT code of the trial you are looking for.
- Was it done on humans? Cell or animal study results are early stages of research.

!! Note that testing a product on human cancer cells in a lab is not representative of testing a product in patients and that 90% of novel drugs entering clinical trials fail.

- Did the study include people with your type of cancer?



#### **4.2.2. Websites**

Finding information on the Internet can be a quick and convenient way to learn about all sorts of health issues. The internet offers millions of pages of information about therapies for cancer, but it isn't perfect. There are no regulations as to what can be posted on a site. It's often hard to know whether the information is trustworthy, accurate, complete or relevant to your situation.

To help make sure that the information you get from the internet is trustworthy, consider the following questions:

- Is the purpose of the website clear? (e.g. education, marketing of a product)
- Who is responsible for the content of the website?
- Does it represent an organization that is well-known and respected?
- Is the website from a reliable source, e.g. university, medical facility, government, company, society, containing a HON-code, etc.?
- Is there evidence from published research articles to support the claims made?
- Has it been recently updated?
- If you buy products via the Internet, check the quality labels. Pay attention to whether the content of the products is in line with the quality label or not.

More information in the guide about supplements.

#### **4.2.3. Books**

It's important to know that information is always changing and that new research results are reported every day. Be aware that if a book is written by only one person, you may only be getting that one person's view on the matter. Questions to ask include:

- Are they recent i.e. published within the last 5 years?
- Does the author have good credentials, e.g. is he/she a researcher or connected with a university?
- Has the book been reviewed by other experts?
- Are they published by a recognized scientific publisher, e.g. Mosby, Elsevier, Sage?
- Does the information come from research on humans?
- Do they cite other research?

#### **4.2.4. Advertising of specific products**

- Does the person or company claim that they have a 'cure'? Be careful!
- Do they give specific information about how well their product works?
- Do they only make claims about positive results that have few side effects?
- Is it a randomized clinical trial? Are copies of the studies available?



#### 4.2.5. Word of mouth

- Did you hear about it from a reputable source?
- Is there scientific evidence to back up what you heard?

#### 4.2.6. Red flags: Unreliable information



The information is anonymous or does not cite any evidence.



The information is biased or one-sided



The information is outdated



There is a conflict of interest (e.g. a company published a study about a product they make or sell)



Testimonials on the internet: those cancer patients could be actors.



It claims to be a “miracle,” or “secret cure” that it “treats all kinds of cancer,” or that it has “no side effects or that it is a “no-risk” product.

### 4.3 Consulting with a non-conventional practitioner

Finding a credible practitioner that is right for you can be a challenge. The following questions may help you select a practitioner with whom you will feel comfortable.

- What training or qualifications does he/she have?
- Does the practitioner have any cancer-specific training?
- Is there a brochure or website with more information about the practice or the therapy?
- Is the practitioner specialized in cancer care? How frequently does he/she treat patients with problems similar to mine? What are the results?
- How will the therapy help address my situation?
- What benefits/risks can I expect from the therapy? Do the benefits outweigh the risks?
- Are there conditions for which this therapy should not be used?
- Could the therapy interact with conventional treatments for cancer e.g., chemotherapy or radiation?
- Does the practitioner have scientific articles or references about using the therapy for cancer?



#### 4.4. Co-ordinating your care

Communicating with all your health care providers is the key to ensuring the best possible health care. It is important to remember that everything you do for your health impacts your body and your overall health. Non-conventional treatments, therapies, nutrition, and other lifestyle changes can all interact with each other and could also interact with your conventional cancer treatment. It is therefore important to make all your health care providers aware of the treatments you are receiving. If you decide to stop a therapy or seek out another practitioner, make sure that you share this information with any other health professionals you may have, as this will help them make decisions about your care.

#### 4.5. Monitoring your use of non-conventional therapies

It is important to monitor how you respond to the therapy. A treatment diary can help you share your health information with your health care providers. Some people find keeping a diary helpful in monitoring and evaluating their non-conventional therapies.

##### Start by writing down:

- The name or brand of the therapy
- Your goal for using the therapy: how this therapy will help you and when you expect to see the effects
- How much and how often you are using the therapy
- Any known side effects to watch out for

##### Keep track over time

- Is it helping you achieve your goal(s)?
- Are you experiencing side effects from it?
- How do you feel today? How did you sleep? Do you feel any change in your body?

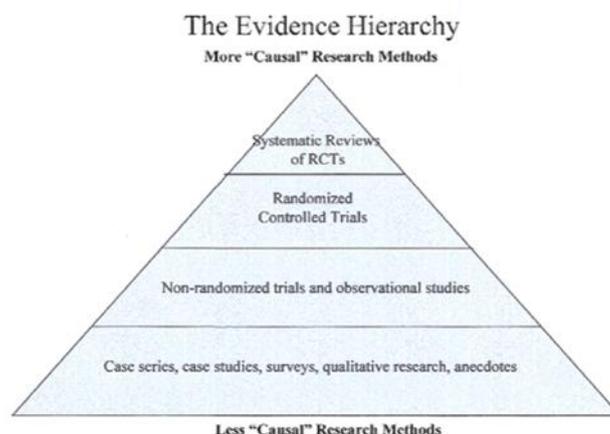
Aim to use just one new non-conventional therapy at a time. This will help you see if the therapy is working or if it has unexpected or unwanted effects.

#### 4.6. Weighing up the benefits and risks of non-conventional therapies

When making your decisions about non-conventional therapies it is important to consider the following questions:

- What evidence is available about the benefits of the therapy?
- Will the therapy meet your goals?
- What is the risk of harm associated with using a particular therapy?
- Has the therapy been shown to be safe, or does it cause side effects or interact with other treatments?
- Is there evidence supporting the use of the therapy in humans? For your cancer type? Has it shown benefit?

The following is an evidence pyramid or 'The Evidence Hierarchy'. Scientists generally consider that the higher an evidence source is on the pyramid, the stronger the evidence is.



In this classical hierarchy, information from systematic reviews of randomized controlled trials is the 'best' evidence, followed by individual randomized controlled trials, then by non-randomized trials, observational studies, and, finally, case-series. (Jonas, W., The Evidence House, 2001)

You will need to weigh up the risks and benefits of any therapy. It can be challenging to evaluate the evidence of whether or not a therapy works against the known risks of harm, like side effects or negative interactions with medication or health conditions.



The following diagram may be helpful when evaluating the balance of risks and benefits of the use of non-conventional therapies.

Does it work? <b>X?</b> Is it safe to use? <b>✓</b> <b>Use only under supervision of your health care provider</b>	Does it work? <b>✓</b> Is it safe to use? <b>✓</b>  <b>Consider use, monitor effects</b>
Does it work? <b>X?</b> Is it safe to use? <b>X?</b>  <b>Don't use</b>	Does it work? <b>✓</b> Is it safe to use? <b>X?</b> <b>Use only under supervision of your health care provider</b>

? = evidence to date is contradictory or unclear

**Timing of non-conventional treatments**

While some non-conventional therapies can be used safely during cancer treatment and care, others cannot. It is important to find out if your non-conventional therapy of interest is best used before, during, or after active conventional treatment of your cancer.

**4.7. Paying for non-conventional services**

The cost of most non-conventional therapies is mostly not covered by health insurance. As a result, the use of non-conventional therapies can be expensive. Therefore, it is important that you carefully consider the costs involved when making your decisions about non-conventional therapies and look into what insurance coverage you may have.



## 5. MAIN SOURCE

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# CAMEO

Complementary Medicine Education & Outcomes Program

The Complementary Medicine Education and Outcomes (CAMEO) Research Program is a collaborative initiative of the University of British Columbia and the BC Cancer Agency (BCCA) research program at the Vancouver Centre of the BCCA. The CAMEO program was developed to address the needs expressed by cancer patients in BC for complementary\* and alternative\* medicine (CAM) information and support in making decisions about CAM.

The mission of this research program is:

“To integrate and evaluate evidence-informed CAM education and decision-support strategies within the context of everyday conventional cancer care, and facilitate the development of new CAM research.”



## 6. GLOSSARY

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### **Clinical trial**

A type of research study that tests how well new medical approaches work in people. These studies test new methods of screening, prevention, diagnosis or treatment of a disease. Also called a clinical study.

### **Complementary and Alternative Medicine**

Complementary and alternative medicine is “a group of diverse medical and health care systems, practices, and products that are not presently considered to be part of conventional medicine.” The term “Complementary and Alternative Medicine” is frequently referred to as “CAM”.

**Alternative treatments** are used instead of conventional medicine.

Alternative treatments may be offered as cancer cures. These treatments have not been proven safe and effective in clinical trials. Some of these methods may be dangerous or have life-threatening side effects. But the biggest danger in most cases is that you may lose the chance to be helped with standard medical treatment. Delays or interruptions in your medical treatments may give the cancer more time to grow and make it less likely that treatment will help.

It is a personal decision only to use alternative treatments. It might have serious health effects. If you decide to postpone or refuse conventional treatment in favor of alternative treatment, stay in touch with your oncologist (cancer doctor). It’s important for your doctor to keep track of how you are doing as you may decide to have conventional treatment later on.

### **Complementary therapy**

A complementary therapy is any practice, therapy or product that is not considered conventional medicine for cancer care. Complementary therapies can be used for easing symptoms and improving your overall health and sense of well-being. Complementary treatments are used in combination with conventional medicine. The purpose of a complementary therapy is not to treat the cancer itself. They help a person cope with cancer, its treatment or side effects, and to feel better. They can take a holistic approach by focusing on the whole person. Acupuncture is an example of a complementary therapy used to help manage nausea caused by chemotherapy.

### **Conventional therapies**

Therapies that have been approved by regulatory authorities and are now used in mainstream healthcare.

### **Non-conventional therapies**

Therapies that are not (yet) approved by regulatory authorities such as CAM.